DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 209 151 SO 013 702

AUTHOR Smith, Joan
TITLE Dodging the Dangers of Reductionism: Some Thoughts on Recent Feminist Theory.
PUB DATE Sep 81
NOTE 40p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Evaluation; *Feminism; *Research Needs; *Research Problems; *Role Theory; Sex Bias; Sex Stereotypes; Social Science Research
IDENTIFIERS Revisionism; Sociobiology

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies major theories prevalent in recent feminist scholarship, discusses biases inherent in these theories, and offers an original theoretical explanation for women's social and economic status. The major objective is to contribute to the body of feminist thought by exposing the biased conceptual tools used by many researchers to explain women's role as unwaged laborer in the home. Two theories often used to account for sexual inequality are biological determinism (biologism) and economic reductionism (economism). Proponents of biologism maintain that women are governed by biological (particularly reproductive) constraints which in turn shape their social lives. Proponents of economism, on the other hand, argue that women's subordination is the effect of the productive system and will be automatically eradicated once women play a parity role in the labor force. Review of recent literature on women's social status and aspirations indicates that among the major topics discussed are the nature of unemployment, the inability of socialist as well as capitalist societies to produce women's liberation, feminist political allegiances, universal qualities of patriarchial history, and material conditions which reinforce the old beliefs of male domination and female inferiority. Review of discussion by feminist and other social science scholars of these and similar questions leads the author to believe that have been only minimally successful in explaining female subordination. The author concludes that a more realistic theory of women's subordination would avoid economism and biologism and would stress instead a systematic and thoroughgoing reinvestigation of the ways we think about the subordination of women and the ways in which social politics implements this subordination. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED209151

NOV 18 1981

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Joan Smith

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Dodging the Dangers of Reductionism: Some Thoughts on Recent Feminist Theory

Joan Smith

State University of New York

at

Binghamton

September, 1981

SO 013 702

Paper presented at ASA Conference noted on SO mag card letter.

During the last two decades feminist theory has attempted to account for sexual inequality while avoiding the twin hazards of biological determinism on the one hand and economic reductionism on the other. In doing so it has increasingly called attention to the role of unwaged labor performed in the home almost exclusively by women. An area of inquiry in its own right - though one long neglected by more conventional social science - women's domestic roles drew the attention of feminist scholars because of the part these roles played in both biologism and economism.

Biological determinism, very broadly speaking, argues that women's reproductive functions are governed by biological constraints which in turn shape their social lives. Economism, on the other hand, argues that women's subordination is the effect of the operations of the productive system and will be automatically eradicated once women play a parity role in a labor force that has succeeded in wresting away from owners the means of production.

Recent feminist scholars have argued that women's subordination, while not biological in origin, should indeed be located in a hierarchical division of labor that was anchored in the organization of housework and child bearing and rearing. These activities are socially organized and defined, though in patterns which predate the contemporary mode of production, and comprise a relatively autonomous system of social relations. This system, usually termed patriarical, is to be distinguished from other systems of domination - principally capitalism.

The domination of women by men to the advantage of men, it is argued, exists apart from any particular economic system but of course always acts in concert with whichever system accompanies it.

Evidence for the accuracy of this formulation was generally drawn from the experience of socialist states. If sexual inequality was ultimately tied to a mode of production, one would expect that under a new mode of production it would disappear. Yet examinations of socialist states proved this to be a vain hope (Weinbaum, Stacey). Women were still charged with reproductive and domestic activities, and these in turn solidified the second class status of both the activities and the women who performed them. Men were still accorded public roles that brought them material as well as psychic success, while women - though now waged workers - continued to be relegated to the separate and unequal sphere of domesticity.

Obviously the empirical "evidence" of the failure of socialism in producing women's liberation raised once more the spectre of the theoretical viability of biological determinism. If the relations between men and women were not subject to the revolutionary changes that accompanied the transition to socialism (it could be plausibly argued) then indeed there might be a strong case for biology as an explanation for the apparent permanency of unequal and hierarchical sexual relations.

This dilemma - the Scylla of economism or the Charybdis of biologism - has established the task of the more influential feminists writing today as well as women engaged in direct political action. The task was to find out why sex role systems are conceptually and empirically independent of economic ones, while simultaniously avoiding the pitfalls of biological determinism.

In my view such a project has been at best only minimally successful. Further and more crucially, whatever success has been

achieved in creating a theoretical distinction between gender systems and modes of production has been purchased at the price of adopting descriptive strategies that equally lend themselves to biological explanations. Moreover, I will argue, by adopting these strategies, feminist theorists leave intact the most objectionable aspects of economism.

Before turning to the specifics, I must make one point about scientific explanation: not just another arcane academic point, but one central to constructing explanations for women's exploitation and thus for guiding the kind of political work necessary for its eradication.

The world of theory is governed by sets of principles upon which explanations must be based. Part of those principles involves the relationship between explanation and description. How a phenomenon is described has enormous consequences for the kind of explanation that is developed about it (Smith, 1981). Let me offer just one simple example. If holding a job is seen as principally a characteristic of the individual, the issue of joblessness is entirely different than if having a job is described as principally a feature of the political economy. The kinds of explanations offered will vary widely and - just as important - so too will the political solutions sought for unemployment. In short, when I go about explaining something - be it the nature of unemployment or women's subordinate roles - I have started off with a description that governs absolutely the kind of explanation I will formulate. That description is fateful in the judgements I make about how the phenomenon in question will act, what pressures I see it responding to, what accounts for its existence, and what would effectively bring about its demise.

I will argue here that in its attempts to avoid what was perceived as economism, a good deal of recent feminist scholarship, in attempting to disprove biological explanations for women's subordination, has in fact come close to achieving the opposite result. By dislodging women's roles from their specific historical relationship to the mode of production, a number of feminist authors have reverted to descriptive tactics that parallel those found in biological explanations for women's subordination. Paradoxically, in spite of the fact that these theorists are anything but biological determinists, they describe women's subordination in a way that makes that subordination compatible with biologism.

In what follows I will briefly sketch how sexual hierarchies are described by the most recent of biological determinists: the sociobiologists. I will not at all present a systematic criticism of sociobiology - this has been done very well elsewhere (Hubbard and Lowe). Rather, my purpose is simply to sketch sociobiology's conceptual tools in order to demonstrate the parallels to be found in a particular body of feminist thought. After that I will investigate the results of using these conceptual tools in feminist theory. Last, I will try to decipher why these authors have had to employ such tools and what could replace them as more adequate to the task.

Thinking Like a Sociobiologist[1]

As their critics have repeatedly noted, sociobiologists in accounting for social behavior attempt to dissociate so-called "traits" from the multiplicity of ways in which they are supposedly merely expressed. To a sociobiologist, the vast differences, for example, between

entering the colleseum expressly to emerge as the victor over a dead opponent and trying to ski across a snow field faster than an opponent are irrelevant. Both are instances of the same thing - in this case, perhaps, aggression. In short, widely diverse social behaviors are lumped together under the "traits" they are said to manifest. This aggregation is accomplished by disregarding the specific forms in which the traits are said to be encased. Thus, aggressiveness can be anything from ski racing to killing Christians: the "trait" includes everything from fighting to the death to trading on the New York Stock Exchange. The sociobiologist eviscerates content from form so as to provide a biological account of human behavior. (I might note that the kinds of metaphors sociobiologists invoke to describe animal behaviors said to parallel human activities - and for which they have been seriously criticized - depend upon this descriptive tactic (Burian). It is not the metaphor, however, which is at the heart of sociobiological descriptive machinery, but rather the mistaken dissociation of "essence" from "appearance" that allows sociobiologists to lump diverse animal behaviors under common anthropmorphic descriptions [Smith, 1981].)

Second, beside dissociating the form of a behavior from what is defined as its essence, the sociobiologist also dissociates the so-called traits from the complex set of relationships which create sets of behaviors, govern their existence, and define their meaning to social participants.

In order to see how this descriptive strategy works, we can turn to a well known position of sociobiologist Edward Wilson (New York Times):

> In hunter-gather societies, men hunt and women stay at home. This strong bias persists in most agricultural and industrial societies, and, on that ground alone, appears to have a genetic origin. . . My own guess is that the genetic bias is intense enough to cause a substantial division of labor even in the most free and most egalitarian of future societies.

For the statement to make any explanatory sense and not be a tautology, Wilson must assert that "being at home" over the course of thousands (and thousands) of centuries has some common feature other than simply that is where women are to be found. He must argue, in short, that the highly complex and infinitely variable relationships that comprise societies and distinguish one from another are extrinsic to the act of being at home. This is accomplished in the sociobiological conceptual apparatus by defining societies as no more than the sum of their parts and implying that each part can be extracted from the totality without doing substantial damage to its nature.

Third, since sociobiology seeks to understand the foundations of human behavior independent of the social context within which this or that behavior is converted into distinctive social activity, it similarly must locate the principle of historical change not in the relationships among parts of a social totality but in terms of the adaptive capacities of populations. That is, they explain the existence of a social behavior in terms of the way it functions for the reproductive success of its carrier. When it ceases to be adaptive, presumably, the carriers will be replaced by

populations with more adaptive genetic programming. History, then, is the account of populations which emerge at given times because they carry a genetic program more efficient at producing offspring than potentially competing populations (Wilson). From this formulation, it should come as no surprise that for sociobiologists, history hardly exists (Tiger and Fox: 61) at all.

Here is what Tiger and Fox say about the matter:

> Nothing worth noting has happened in our evolutionary history since we left off hunting and took to the fields and the towns - nothing except perhaps a little selection for immunity to epidemics, and probably not even that. "Man the hunter" is not an episode in our distant past: we are still man the hunter, incarcerated, domesticated, polluted, crowded and bemused.

Of course this view of history is a direct corollary of the earlier descriptive strategies I have described. When the form in which a "trait" is carried is unimportant relative to the "trait" itself (when it doesn't matter whether one is talking about trading in stocks or killing strangers), and when the specifics of the set of relationships which give meaning to the behavior are relegated to the status of epiphenomena, then behaviors that are widely divergent across time and socieities can be lumped together and defined as examples of the same thing. Sociobiologists develop their theory of history from this vantage point. For them, history is something that occurred in some distant past. History exists in the biological origins of one genotype or another.

Reductionism and Feminist Thought

In what I have said about the descriptive tactics invoked by sociobiologists, we can locate three major standards for describing things. First, a behavior or trait is only explicable when it is stripped of its immediate appearance and when that appearance is not in any systematic way linked to the basic object of inquiry. Second, the residues of this stripping process - in the case of sociobiology, the "traits" - are described in such a fashion that they are independent of the social totality in which they are found, as though they had an autonomous existence. Third, the history of these stripped-down phenomena is identified with their genesis at some point in time rather than with qualitative change in the conditions to which they are subject for their existence, reproduction, and perhaps eventual demise (Smith, 1981).

The materials the sociobiologists deal with are so widely different from those of the feminist authors I will be referring to that it takes an initial leap of the imagination to see the parallels I want to emphasize. Feminist social theory has been significantly shaped by what has come to be called socialist-feminist politics. The agreed upon agenda for the socialist-feminists - among whom I certainly count myself - was to integrate questions of sex, race, and class and, as Ros Petchesky pointed out (Petchsky: 378), "for the building the bridges which we see as critical between the feminist movement and Third World, anti-imperialist, and socialist revolutionary movements." The reason for the hyphen Petchesky explained, was socialist feminists' inability to locate women "solidly and respectably in the volumes of Capital." The purpose of the dual term "Marxist-feminist" was to note (Petchsky:

376) that:

> production and reproduction, work and the family far from being separate territories like the moon and the sun or the kitchen and the shop, are really intimately related modes that reverberate upon one another and frequently occur in the same social, physical, and even psychic spaces.

Yet, the hyphen also indicates that reproduction and kinship as well as the family have, in Petchesky's words, "their own, historically determined products, material techniques, modes of organization and power relationships" (Petchesky: 377). Further, the male dominance that characterizes this system has significant consequences for the state. Women's subordination is determined both by the mode of production and by patriarchical structures which exercise their own control on the political economy (Petchsky: 378).

The hyphenated character of feminist political allegiances is reflected in what Iris Young calls dual systems theory. According to this body of feminist scholarship (Young: 170),

> "women's oppression arises from two distinct and relatively autonomous systems. The system of male domination, most often 'patriarchy', produces the specific gender oppression of women."

Young quotes Linda Phelp's early statement on the relationship between patriarchy on one hand and the mode of production on the other (Phelps: 39):

> Patriarchal... and capitalist social relationships are two markedly different ways that human beings have interacted with each other and have built social, political and economic institutions.

According to those feminists who subscribe to a dual systems approach to women's roles, male domination and its concomitant female subordination is a relatively autonomous system of domination - autonomous, that is, with respect to any particular social form it occurs in. The claim is that women's subordination must itself be explained both in the context of particular historical structures but, as well, in its own right, without reference to these structures.

This thesis of autonomy - in order to be coherent - must also argue that the domination of women by men across different modes of production, while varying enormously, obviously has some core aspects in common which are more important than what distinguishes sexual hierarchies in each society they are found in. Most feminists writing in this vein locate that similarity in systems of sexual and biological reproduction. One of the most influential of such accounts, and certainly the most original, is Gayle Rubin's (Rubin).

Rubin calls the universal of sexual and reproductive relations a sex-gender system. All societies, she claims, organize the biological differences between men and women into specific social arrangements. This common sex-gender system is characterized by a symetrical exchange in which men always exchange women and not ever the other way around. Further, this sexual division of labor absolutely ensures that the interests of men, not those of women, are met in the act of exchange. According to Rubin, the particular mode of production fills in the details of the exchange, but the sex-gender system can be both conceputally and at particular

historical moments empircally isolated from the mode of production.[2]

A similar conclusion is reached by Nancy Chodorow in her analysis of the subordination of women (Chodorow, 1978 and 1979). The source of male domination is not in the particulars of the society it is found in, but in the universal fact that women rather than men mother. This fact has profound consequences: "for family structure, for realtions between the sexes, for ideology about women, and for the sexual division of labor and sexual inequality both inside the family and in the nonfamilial. world." (Chodorow, 1978:86).

For Chodorow, sex-gender systems are on the same level of abstraction as modes of production. Every society has a sex-gender system; yet in every society the sex-gender system and the mode of production compose two distinct systems, though they are "linked (and almost inextricably intertwined) in numerous ways." In our own society the two appear to be distinct and independent of each other because, according to Chodorow (Chodorow: 1978:85),

> material production has progressively left the home, the family has been eliminated as a productive economic unit and women and men have in some sense divided the public and domestic spheres between them.

Yet for all the differences between various kinds of sex-gender systems, says Chodorow, there are more similarities from which we gain useful knowledge about the subordination of women. The similarities are linked to mothering - the exclusive province of women in all known societies (Chodorow: 1978:86):

> Women's mothering is a central and defining structural feature of our society's organization of gender, and

> one that it has in common with all other societies. . . features of our own sexual division of labor and kinship system remain which we can tentatively characterize as universal. . . These include women's involvement in routine daily cooking for their immediate families. . . and heterosexuality as a sexual norm and organizational principle of family organization and the structure of marriage. . . men with full adult status do not routinely care for small children.

While Chodorow notes that there are substantial variations in family and kinship patterns between societies, they are in the long run "variations within a sexual and familial division of labor in which women mother."

In a much different mode, Zillah Eisenstein recognizes a system of sexual domination existing independently of the society's economy and exhibits identical characteristics that join it with systems of male domination found in antiquity (Eisenstein: 1981: 21-22).

> There is a continuity to patriarchal history that has not existed in economic history. . . [Patriarchy] changes historically, but universal qualities of it are maintained even if they are specifically redefined.

After a remarkable and truly original review of the literature on historical periods commencing in Attic Greece, through feudalism, to contemporary capitalism, Eisenstein concludes (Eisenstein: 1981: 22-22):

> The universality of patriarchy in Western society is expressed in the sexual assignment of private and public life. Although the meaning of "public and

> private" changes in concrete ways, the assignment of public space to men and private space to women is continuous in Western history.

Sexual hierarchies, whether in ancient Greece or in mid-town Manhattan, have for Eisenstein enough in common (although they admittedly vary along several dimensions) that they can each be considered the same system: patriarchy. (She has no particular commitment to the term patriarchy but only to the issue it denotes, which is that within all political history, no matter how diverse, sexual hierarchy is structurally present as a relatively autonomous system [Eisenstein: 1981:28].)

The root of that pan-historical commonality, for Eisenstein, is to be found not in biology but in the fact that "men have chosen to interpret and politically use the fact that women are the reproducers of humanity" (Eisenstein: 1979:25). Relations of reproduction are arranged hierarchically for all of Western history, Eisenstein argues, and thus present a unified system which interacts - sometimes in a complementary fashion and sometimes in contradiction - with particular modes of production.

Heidi Hartmann's analysis of sexual hierarchies shifts the focus away from reproduction specifically to the more general hierarchical sexual division of labor. For Hartmann, like Rubin, Chodorow, and Eisenstein, we can locate sexual hierarchies in which men are dominant in a veriety of societies (Hartmann: 1981:373):

> In this perspective capitalism is a relative late comer, whereas patriarchy, the hierarchical relation between men and women in which men are dominant and women are subordinate, was an early arrival.

What joins together the variety of forms in which this

domination emerges is that men control women's labor and, because they have this control, occupy different places in kin structures than do women. This variation in kinship place is the common element running through all of post-primitive history and, according to Hartmann, it gets utilized in the organization of contemporary wage labor.

Thus, for each of the theorists I have been discussing - and they represent some of the most serious and the most interesting of recent feminist scholarship - female subordination cannot be reduced to or explained by the mode of production, because it shares common and central features with female subordination as found in a variety of productive systems. Men in all societies have control over the exchange of women (Rubin); women do the mothering, which sets up asymetrical and exploitative relationships between men and women (Chodorow); no political revolution has yet addressed itself to patriarchical relations, so men dominate women in whatever social formation emerges by continually relegating them to private spheres (Eisenstein); and male control over female labor can be put to any number of uses in a variety of social contexts (Hartmann). The analysis of male domination and female subordination rests on the author's assigning near universality to one or another social arrangement. This universality of male domination - or rather its appearance - is constructed from the strategy of divesting its core features of the vast panoply of social arrangements which give it its contemporary form. Once these arrangements are peeled away, the dazzling variety of relationships that constitute male domination become examples of essentially the same thing. The bride price in some ancient African tribe and the 20th Century marriage contract that

stipulates mutual obligations should the relationship dissolve are in all relevant respects dimensions of the same core social relationship of domination.

The attempt to elucidate a central core or essence of male domination is part of the more general effort to explain what is seen as its regularity. This attempt rests on a commonly held assumption concerning the nature of human social relationships and the sort of descriptive tactics that must be employed to grasp and explain them adequately. Specifically, from the point of view of the feminist accounts I have described here, any relationship must be described in such a manner as to get beyond its immediate features and reach its essense. Though always shrouded in the particularities of the moment, it is this essence, rather than the contemporary setting it is found in, that determines the way male domination makes its appearance in the historical stage.

Because a principal feature of male supremacy, as it is described in much contemporary feminist theory, is its putative autonomy from any particular known historical period, it exists in a semiisolation chamber. Its connection to any other feature of social life is not an essential dimension of its nature. It is this aspect of the conceptual apparatus employed by many feminist theorists that allows them to suggest that patriarchy is at once a precondition for the modern period and something that could postdate it.

Here for example is how Hartmann describes this feature of patriarchy (Hartmann: 1981:373):

> A schematic view of the development of capitalism in Western societies suggests that capitalism generally took root in societies where production

> and redistribution had taken place largely in households and villages. . . The decentralized home system, which I see as a fundamental result of patriarchy, also meets crucial requirements for the reproduction of the capitalist system.

I have no quarrel with Hartmann's important observation that the development of the decentralized home as the locus of production, distribution, and exchange was an important ingredient in the early accumulation necessary for the formation of capital.[3] I also have no problem with the observation that a decentralized home meets the requirements for reproducing the capitalist wage relationship. But Hartmann is saying more than just that; and this is what I wish to direct the reader's attention to.

In Hartmann's formulation quoted above, the home she refers to is the key site of the hierarchical nature of the relationship between men and women, and with respect to key aspects of male domination it is no different under advanced capitalism than under the stage of primitve accumulation. Indeed, she argues elsewhere, the continuation of this domestic hierarchical relationship between men and women was won by working class men in the face of what would have otherwise been different tendencies of capital in "its pure form" (Hartmann: 1979).

But to identify pre-capitalist households with contemporary ones is in my view precisely to obscure what we need to know about female subordination.

The period of capitalist primitive accumulation Hartmann refers to means precisely that period in which accumulation of capital took place on the basis of relationships of production that were pre-capitalist. In that sense, the disaggregated and

independent households to which Hartmann properly draws our attention were a precondition for the development of full capitalist production but they were not yet capitalist themselves. The outcome of that primitive accumulation is part of a world-wide historical process that eventually led to the dominance of the capital wage relation as the guiding principle in the entire world economy. That wage relationship exercises its influence over all relations even though they concretely fall outside of the wage. Once that occurred - once non-household labor became decisive - then activities within the household became ordered by a set of relationships totally different from and in opposition to those which had been at work in the earlier period. Household labor and the set of relationships to which it is subject became an outcome of the capitalist wage relationship and no longer its presupposition.[4]

Depending on historical circumstances through the ages, labor within the household, along with the set of household relationships which guaranteed it and gave it form, have entirely different determinants and totally different articulations with the rest of the social world. No matter how similar they may look on the surface, the relationships between men and women now and those of six centuries ago are not only different - they are antithetical to each other. If we fail to grasp this fact, and thus lump all of these relationships into the catch-all category of patriarchy, we ensure that we will totally misunderstand the most crucial aspect of women's history. We will, in fact, render that aspect nonexistent. The determinants that were responsible for the existence of household labor and the existence of the set of social relationships it expresses during the stage of primitive accumulation were undermined at every step precisely by the role those relationships played

in the development of capitalist production. They were replaced by a set of determinants that were the antithesis of earlier ones. By suggesting that capital "borrowed" patriarchical relationships located in and expressed by the organization of families and households, Hartmann dismisses this central historical process as being largely irrelevant to the hierarchical relationships between men and women.[5]

A similar analytical stance is adopted by Eisenstein in her analysis of what she calls "capitalist patriarchy" (Eisenstein, 1979:25):

> . . . patriarchy precedes capitalism through the existence of the sexual ordering of society which derives from ideological and political interpretations of biological differences. . . a patriarchical culture is carried over from one historical period to another to protect the sexual hierarchy of society . . .A sexual division of labor and society that defines people's activities, purposes, goals, desires, and dreams according to their biological sex, is at the base of patriarchy and capitalism. It divides men and women into their respective hierarchical sex roles and structures their related duties in the family domain and within the economy.

If patriarchy in Eisenstein's formulation is to mean anything more than an abstract concept that captures the infinite variety of arrangements assumed by the biological raw material of sex, she must mean that some specific set of conditions for the domination of women by men are imported from one mode of production to another. Yet Eisenstein fails to specify what material conditions give

life to the ideas and beliefs that make men "choose" to dominate women. Such specification is essential in order to validate real and objective sexual oppression. We can choose to do almost anything; but, unless we have access to the socially organized conditions necessary to be effective, we will hardly meet with success. I could choose to dominate my dean, for example, but the effort would probably result in something other than what I had intended.

Old ideas of domination and beliefs of women's sexual inferiority can persist only if there are real material conditions that place men and women in unequal and hierarchical relationship to each other (Gimenez, 1980). These relationships can remain both unequal and hierarchical but nevertheless be fundamentally altered by virtue of changes in the conditions which guarantee their continued existence and, as well, by changes in the specific set of constraints and contraditions to which they are subject. If Eisenstein is to be accurate in her assessment that patriarchy is a system distinct from the mode of production, both the conditions of its reproduction and its contradictions must in all relevant respects be identical across different economic systems. Nevertheless, since she insists that patriarchy can be considered apart from any specific organization of material life, these material relationships are never delineated, nor could they be (Eisenstein, 1981:22).[6]

Social relationships - the backbone of our ideas and our actions - are fundamentally defined and ordered by the set of processes responsible for their origination, reproduction, and possible demise. What emerged, as capitalist social relations took hold throughout the world, were realtionships between men and women

increasingly and integrally linked with capitalist-dominated production and with the distribution and consumption of capitalist commodities.[7] These relationships were subject to entirely new constraints and contradictions. Ideas that predated capitalism persisted not because the grounds of the earlier relationship between men and women have persisted but because these ideas served to shore up new relationships and protect them from new constraints.

It is these processes to which feminists must address themselves, not only in constructing adequate theories of female subordination but - perhaps more importantly - in political struggles. Yet it is precisely these processes which are obscured in feminist accounts of male domination when theorists abstract domination from the distinct set of relations that are responsible for reproducing it and treat it as separate from the set of socially structured and historically specific constraints and contradictions to which contemporary male domination is liable.

Assuming that the infinte variety of activities women were assigned to over the past amounted to essentially the same experience for them, and further assuming that the wide variety of relationships with which male-domination female-subordination was articulated over many centuries were irrelevant to the core fact of women's less-than-equal status, many feminists have increasingly defined sexual hierarchies as having a historical breadth far wider than that of any specific mode of production. Indeed, for some feminist writers, these relationships have amounted to universal fact of human experience.[8] It is this putative supra-historical quality which demands explanation for a good many feminists writing today and has set up what Rosaldo recently

criticized as a "search for origins" (Rosaldo, 1980). Yet in my view this near universality, rather than being a historical fact that needs to be accounted for, has been produced only recently by the descriptions of sexually based hierarchies in a good deal of recent feminist writing.

For example, in Hartmann's formulation, the reorganization of households under patriarchical control was decisive in the petty accumulation that accompanied the developments of capitalism. Yet, she argues, since those relations apparently still exist - that is, since a good deal of production still takes place privately in homes and the labor force is rigidly organized on the basis of sexual hierarchies - it is correct to conclude that patriarchy, while not necessarily universal, occupies a much broader historical niche than does capitalism (Hartmann, 1981:391). Hartmann's conclusion flows directly from her predefinition of women's subordination as expressing the same relevant set of relationships, whether in late feudalism or in advanced capitalism. Its relatively longish history is an artifact of Hartmann's conceptual tools rather than evidence of its theoretical independence from a mode of production.

Eisenstein offers a slightly different argument. Patriarchy does change, not by virtue of the economic system within which it operates, but by virtue of its own internal dynamics. Yet, she argues (Eisenstein, 1981:21-22),

> There is a continuity to patriarchical history that has not existed in economic history. [Patriarchy is] a term that expresses the continuity of women's oppression, which has existed through different economic systems. Patriarchy is not as historically specific a system

> as any economic system we have known. It changes historically but universal qualities of it are maintained even if they are specifically redefined. (My emphasis)

In short, for Eisenstein there are aspects to patriarchy that are immune to historical dynamics - even its own. This immunitey is what gives the domination of women by men its special force.

Eisenstein's arguments are similar to many of those offered by recent feminist writers who define history as mere chronology rather than as the study of the social forces responsible for bringing events into the world, reshaping them, and eventually causing their demise. History occurs when social structures - sexual hierarchies and economies, for example - are brought into new and entirely novel relationships with each other, causing them to lose their original identity in the process and resulting in fundamental changes in the entire society.

Conclusion

I began this paper by suggesting that the effort to construct a theory of women's subordination that avoided both economism and biologism has resulted in the construction of central analytic catagories equally amenable to explanations offered by biologists. It is the existence of these commalities that allows for the observation of anthropologist/sociobiologist Lionel Tiger that much in feminist thought is reconcilable with a sociobiological explanation (Tiger, 1970):

> I've already noted the feminist answer to why male

> dominance exists]: patriarchy exists because it has existed for so long and so universally. Despite enormous variation in standard of living, religious belief, economies, ecologies, political history, ideology and kinship systems of different socieites, the same pattern broadly prevails because males have always dominated females in an effective and widespread scheme. . . If male dominance extends over the whole species - and has existed for so long - we seem constrained by the law of parsimony to look first into the biological information and theory at our disposal for an explanation.

I have not been interested in documenting empirical inaccuracies in the feminist writings I have been referring to. Quite to the contrary. I believe that the majority of them have brillantly drawn our attention to crucial aspects of women's existences - aspects that heretofore have remained outside of what was perceived as the legitimate perserve of social scientific investigation. Nevertheless, the effort to avoid identifying women's social and political subordination with imperatives of the economic system has been purchased, in my view, at an enormous price. New life has been breathed into old strategems of biological reductionism.

I want to be quite clear that I do not consider that the feminist writers I have been referring to are biological determinists. What I do believe, however, is that what they construct out of the descriptive tactics I have explicated here is a kind of phenomenon that can be easily imported into the biological frame of reference.

1. Both sociobiology and the feminists I have referred to

treat the occurrence of male dominance as the same sort of behavior, whether it be found in advanced capitalism or socialism or feudal societies. In that sense, male dominance, or at least fundamental aspects of it, exists apart from the particular constellations that compose the society and that distinguish one social formation from another.

2. Both sociobiology and some forms of feminist thought consider the phenomenon in question - sexual hierarchy - apart from its particular appearance in any given society. Male dominance distinguished from the way it is manifested becomes the object of theoretical inquiry.

3. From the viewpoint of the two theoretical frameworks, male dominance as such continues to exist quite apart from the social and historical processes whereby one kind of society is replaced by another. Therefore, within both these frameworks, the history of male dominance resides in its origins in time rather than in the kinds of historical processes that are responsible both for bringing it into being and for fundamentally revising the social structures within which it is expressed. From the viewpoint of sociobiology as well as the kind of feminist theory I have been discussing here, male dominance exists in time but core aspects of it are essentially untouched by the social forces which have structured historical time into discrete and clearly identifiable historical moments.

The question raised by the feminist writers I have been discussing has encouraged the tactics they adopted: why has male domination existed over the course of so many centuries? I am not entirely clear how to answer that question - partly, I am sure, because of my own limitiations. But I suspect the other problem

is that it is not the right question - at least to begin with.

I think we must begin by understanding why such a widespread lack of equality characterizes the entire world economy - what structures, processes, or forces create that inequality, sustain it, and reshape it in response to the contradictions it is so evidently subject to. Once we have some (very) broad answers to those questions, we may be in a better position to investigate inequalities between men and women in earlier periods.

Unpaid domestic labor and childbearing and rearing - the role assigned to women and the role to which socialist-feminist direct their theoretical and political attention - is one form of social labor that shares important features with a myriad of activities. Here I have in mind subsistence cropping; informal marketing (the flea markets and garage sales that dot urban sidewalks and rural front yards); informal exchange of services (rides to work and child-care exchange are just two everyday events in most of our lives); and the multiplicity of other activities that are non-waged and subordinated to those more conventionally defined as part of the economic system.

Women rather than men perform the majority of these chores. Nevertheless, before inquiring into why the chores have been so disproportionately parcelled out to women, we must first have some firm idea about the nature of the activities and how they fit into the general scheme of things. Absolutely hindering that investigation are notions of patriarchy, the descriptive tactics that generate it, and the kinds of research it invariably leads to. That is to say, many theorists -- indeed most feminist theorists who would define themselves as socialist feminists -- have used the apparently different forms of labor to argue that

they represent two distinct kinds of systems, one capitalist and the other patriarchical. Here, for example, is Hartmann's position (Hartmann, 1981:391-392):

> Over the next twenty years, while there will be some change in the sexual division of labor resulting from conflict and struggles, patriarchy will not be eradicated. Despite at least a century of predictions and assertions that capitalism will triumph over patriarchy -- a situation in which all production would take place under capitalist relations and all people would be wage earners on equal terms -- patriarchy has survived... . This means that a substantial amount of production will remain in the home. . .It is necessary. . .that a substantial proportion of women's collective work hours be retained in the home if the patriarchical requirement that women continue to do housework and provide childcare be fulfilled.

Eisenstein , as well, explicitly contrasts non-waged activities with those that are waged. The former are patriarchical in form and the latter capitalist. While each is shaped by the other, she argues, their pristine nature is best captured in the two different forms of activities each organizes (Eisenstein, 1979:28-29):

> ...capitalism has a set of controls which emanate directly from the economic class relations of society and their organization in the workplace. And it seems to assume a harmony between the two systems at all points. As we move further into advanced capitalism

> we can see how uneasy this relationship is becoming. As women increasingly enter the labor force, some of the control of patriarchal familial relations seems to be undermined - the double day becomes more obvious. But the ghettoization of women within the labor force at the same time maintains a system of hierarchical control of women, both sexually and economically, which leaves the sexual hierarchy of the society intact. Deference to patriarchal hierarchy and control is shown in the very fact that the search for cheap labor has not lead to a full integration of women into all parts of the labor force.

Ironically, by attempting to escape economism, a good deal of feminist theory not only employed tactics compatible with biological determinism but left economism virtually unscathed. By insisting that the world is composed of two relatively autonomous systems of social relations that come in contact with each other and are ultimately intertwined -- one organized around the public economy and the other around the private world of reproductive labor -- feminist scholars implicitly accept the position that they (rightly) attempted at first to criticize. By constructing non-economic explanations for women's subordination, they leave relations of production as the only ones which apparently are attached to the principal motors of history reshaping the rest of the social world.

Young makes an observation parallel to the one I am offering when she notes that dual-system theory "tacitly endorses the traditional Marxian position that the 'woman question' is auxiliary to the central question of a Marxian theory of society"

(Young, 1980: 176). Yet I doubt that one must supplant Marxism with a new kind of "feminist historical materialism", as Young goes on to suggest, to bring the women question into central consideration.

It is true that Marxist analysis up until the very recent past has stressed the historical processes by which capital begins to be able to assert its control over the surplus labor time of workers by removing a substantial portion of labor from the home. But it is not necessary to Marxism to then conclude that any labor which escapes this direct domination is by that fact either outside of capitalist relations or auxiliary to it. The world capitalist system is composed of a multiplicity of labor forms that were brought into being by the full development of capital - no matter how much they may resemble earlier forms. It is hardly anti-feminist to suggest that a women in her kitchen who depends on her husband's wage and thus his good will finds her situation no less determined by the processes that compose the world capitalist system than does an unemployed male black worker in Detroit, a female black subsistence farmer in southern Africa, or a white male fully employed computer technician in Menlo Park. <u>The task is to discover the processes that create these "historically divergent yet ultimately united, patterns of labor force formation</u>" (Wallerstein et al.: 6).

To be sure, Marx pointed out over a century ago (Marx, 1973: 106-107):

> In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence

> to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colors and modifies their particularity. . . In the Middle Ages, capital itself - apart from pure money - capital (had a) landed proprietary character. In bourgeois society it is the opposite. Agriculture more and more becomes merely a branch of industry, and is entirely dominated by capital.

Similiarly, in an earlier period patriarchal relations cast their long shadow on all other relations, even those that were increasingly outside of their sway. While non-patriarchal forms of production were being organized, these continued to pay obeisance to the traditional structures of authority and control. (Pirenee, 1946: 168ff). In our own period, by contract, patriarchy is merely present in what Marx would call its stunted form (Marx, 1973: 105-106. See Dublin, 1979, for a graphic account):

> . . . since bourgeois society is itself only a contradictory form of development, relations derived from earlier forms will often be found within it only in an entirely stunted form, or even travestied.

But that is not at all to argue that the subordination of women is not guaranteed by other social forms.

To be true to the feminist mission -- to understand the contemporary relations between men and women in ways that will lead to fundamental changes -- feminists must be prepared to explain how and why this historical process takes place, how and why old forms of domination are supplanted by new ones.

By asserting the existence of a system of social relations theoretically immune from capital, although empirically caught up in it, we ignore the presence of that process and its effects on our lives.

The key problem is to first confront the multiplicity of labor forms that comprise the world capitalist system and the ways they have been brought into relation with wage labor. What I suspect we will find when we begin considering capitalism as the unity of contradictory elements is that unequal and hierarchical gender roles, along with other kinds of systemic inequalities anchored in non-waged relations, play a fundamental role in holding those contradictory elements together in a unified system.

By identifying essential features of contemporary gender roles with antedeluvian relations between men and women rather than with the wide variety of current inequalities that comprise the social world, feminists are in very real danger of espousing a theoretical framework that is incapable of taking seriously non-gender specific forms of oppression.

If feminism is a distinguishable theoreticl enterprise, it is so because of its insistence on the inextricable link between theory and practice. What I have tried to say here is that without a systematic and thoroughgoing reinvestigation of the ways we think about the subordination of women, there are still no principled grounds for objecting to the politics implied in either biological determinism or economic reductionism.

1. What follows in my discussion of sociobiology is an abbreviated version of what I developed in an earlier paper (Smith, 1981). I want to thank Judith Stacey for her initial comments on a much earlier version of this paper. While we still have disagreements, her continued comradeship has been invaluable to me. Marian Lowe and Ruth Hubbard helped me to redirect my thinking from the original paper (Smith, 1981). Much different versions of this paper were given at the National Women's Studies Association meetings, May 1980; The Western Social Science meetings, April 1981; and the American Sociological Association meetings, August 1981.

2. It is important to note that Rubin uses the term sex-gender system to denote "a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human social intervention" and is therefore neutral with respect to the particular form it takes (Rubin, 165). But Rubin argues that up until the present the sex-gender system has been characterized by the exploitation of women in and by the exchange relationship between kinship groups wherein men have the advantage.

3. There is a growing literature on household formation and petty accumulation. See for example Hans Medick (1976), David Levine (1977), and Lawrence Stone (1975). The exchange between Michael Merrill (1977 and 1979-80) and James Wessman (1979-80) is relevant to the points being raised here, but I believe both miss the mark because neither is sufficiently engaged in studying transformations of total social formations. Thus Merrill posits a household mode of

production in the U.S.! Obviously, social formations are composed of more than one way of doing business; but one way is dominant and creates the conditions to which all others are necessarily shaped. If we define social relations in large measure on the basis of the conditions for their existence, then the so-called household mode of production in a fully developed capitalist world economy will have little but its name in common with that mode found during periods of petty accumulation. I will return to this point in what follows.

4. My colleague Dale Tomich has drawn my attention to this crucial difference between forms of labor that aid in the early development of capital and those which are a consequence of that development (Tomich, 1981).

5. Jean Gardiner (1975), among others, argues that there are specific determinants of domestic labor under capitalism each of which requires its devaluation and subsequent subordination to immediately contemporary pressures emerging from the political economy. A thorough analysis of domestic labor in a precapitalist period would, I believe, clearly demonstrate that its determinants were exactly the opposite. One could argue that this is irrelevant to the central point - that women were subordinated in each. Without discounting that observation, I simply want to point out that even so the subordination is totally different and requires different explanations and quite clearly different political strategies for overcoming it.

6. Eisenstein is careful to dissociate universality and

inevitability, as would most of the other feminist writers I am referring to. Nevertheless, this does not moot the point I wish to make here. In order for a social relationship to have core universal aspects, it must rest on a set of conditions that co-exist with it across time. Eisenstein argues that this condition is the hierarchical sexual organization of Western society. But that is to assume that that hierarchy - insofar as it relates to the specific structure of patriarchy - has itself remained unchanged, that it articulated with the rest of the social world in all relevant respects the same in 300 B.C. as it does in 1981.

7. I borrow this formulation in a slightly amended form from Wallerstein et al. (n.d.: 9).

8. None of the feminist writers I have referred to in fact explicitly endorses universality as a feature of female subordination, and several explicitly reject it. Even so, their frame of reference lends itself to that interpretation. On the other hand, a number of feminist writers do assert the universality of female subordination. I have not discussed their work here since it would have amounted to the construction of a "straw-woman." See Mary Daley (1978) and Susan Brownmiller (1975).

9. "...<u>continuity</u> [of patriarchy] (my emphasis) can really be understood only by understanding the way patriarchy <u>changes</u> (Eisenstein's emphasis) in different historical and political periods. It functions <u>similarly</u> (my emphasis) and differently in Victorian England and post World War II America. By

understanding how it is different, one can examine how patriarchy changes and does not change (my emphasis)" (Eisenstein, 1981: 27-28). I would agree with Eisenstein that the subordination of women over the last 90 years or so has undergone significant changes, though none so significant that it expresses a different social relationship. Similiarly, capital has changed in the same period but remains capital. However, staying with the analogy, one can say that the mode of production is entirely different now than it was in the 12th Century. So too with the relations between women and men. Eisenstein would say quite the opposite: female subordination has remained in many essentials the same. The question is, are these features so central to the phenomenon in question that they are evidence that there has been substantial continuity? One can say that in the 12th Century people engaged in getting their food, exchanging goods, and working just as in the 20th; but that is no evidence that there has not been a fundamental revolution in the mode of production.

--

REFERENCES

Brownmiller, Susan

1975 Against Our Will. New York: Simon and Schuster

Burian, Richard M.

1978 "A Methodological Critique of Sociobiology," in Caplan: 1978

Caplan, Arthur L.

1978 The Sociobiology Debate. New York: Harper and Row

Daly, Mary

1978 Gyn/Ecology, The Metaethics of Radical Feminism. Boston: Beacon

Dublin, Thomas

1979 Women at Work. New York: Columbia University Press.

Eisenstein, Zillah

1979 Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist-Feminism (editor). New York: Monthly Review Press

1981 The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism. New York: Longman --

Gardner, Jean

1979 "Women's Domestic Labor," New Left Review (January-February): 47-58. Also reprinted in Eisenstein, 1979: 173-189

Gimenez Martha E.

1980 "The Oppression of Women: A Structuralist Marxist View" (mineo) Forthcoming in Ino Rossi ed., Structural Sociology; Theoretical Perspectives and Substantive Analysis, New York: Columbia University Press.

Hartmann, Heidi

1979 "Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex," in Eisenstein, 1979: 206-207

1981 "The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework," Signs Vol. 6, No. 3, Spring.

Hubbard, Ruth, and Marian Lowe

1979 Genes and Gender: Pitfalls in Research on Sex and Gender. New York: Gordian Press.

Levine, David

1977 Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism. New York: Academic Press

Marx, Karl

1973 Grundrisse. New York: Vintage Books

Medick, Hans

1976 "The Proto-Industrical Family Economy: The Structural Functions of Households and Family During the Transition From Peasant Society to Industrial Capitalism," Social History, No. 3, Oct.: 391-315

Merrill, Michael

1977 "Cash is Good to Eat: Self Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," Radical History Review (Winter) 42-71

New York Times

1975 Interview with Edward Wilson. Oct. 12.

Phelps, Linda

1975 "Patriarchy and Capitalism," Quest. Vol. 2, No. 2. (Fall)

Pirene, Henri

1946 Medieval Cities. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press

Petchesky, Rosalind

1979 "Dissolving the Hyphen: A Report of Marxist-Feminist Groups 1-5," in Eisenstein, 1979: 373-389

Reiter, Rayna

1976 Towards an Anthropology of Women. New York: Monthly Review Press

Rosaldo, M.Z.

1980 "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding," Signs Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring) 389-417

Rubin, Gayle

1976 "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," in Rieter, 1976

Smith, Joan

1981 "Sociobiolody and Feminism: The Very Strange Courtship of Competing Paradigms," Philosophical Forum, Forthcoming.

Stacey, Judith

1975 "When Patriarchy Kowtows: The Significance of the Chinese Evolution for Feminist Theory," in Eisenstein, 1979: 299-348. Reprinted from Feminist Studies, 2, No. 43 (1975)

Tiger, Lionel,

1970 "Male Dominance? Yes, Alas. A Sexist Plot? No." New York Times Magazine. Ocotber 25.

Fox, Robin

1978 "The Human Biogram," in Caplan (1978).

Tomich, Dale

1981 "Original Accumulation, Colonial Slavery and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism". Unpublished paper.

Wallerstein, Immanuel, William Martin, and Torry Dickinson

n.d. "Household Structures and Production Processes: Theoretical Concerns, plus data from southern Africa and Nineteenth Century United States," Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies Historical Systems and Civilizations, SUNY, Binghampton,

Weinbaum, Batya

1976 "Women in Transition to Socialism: Perspectives on the Chinese Case," Review of Radical Political Economies 8, no. 1

Wessman, James

1979-80 "A Household Mode of Production - Another Comment" Radical History Review, Vol. 22 (Winter), 129-139

Wilson, Edward

1975 Sociobiology: The New Synthesis. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

Young, Iris

1980 "Socialist Feminism and the Limit of Dual Systems Theory," Socialist Review, No 50-51 (Vol.10, no 2/3 March-June 188-169).